

It's My Life, My Death And My Choice

Statement by Steve Johnson, Brain Cancer Patient, Helena

I think I should have something to say about my ending.

I have spoken with my doctor about what is likely to happen as my brain cancer progresses. I am now fairly disabled and it is likely that I will go blind. I am very concerned about intense pain and loss of dignity as the cancer worsens.

Our Montana Supreme Court recently decided that our end-of-life medical choices are private. Terminally ill adults can request medication to bring about a peaceful death. It is a great comfort to know I can ask my doctor to honor my decision when the time comes.

I feel pretty good right now, but the cancer is not going away. I am 72 years old. I spent my working years as a large-animal veterinarian, farmer, rancher and schoolteacher. I had a very healthy life, until eight years ago.

I was feeding the cows and calves on our ranch that spring, carrying a hay bale in the fields, when I passed out. There was snow on the ground then, and I remember waking up wondering what had happened. My wife took me to the hospital, and tests revealed that I had brain cancer. Surgery removed much, but not all, of the cancer. I have undergone a series of radiation treatments, and even traveled to Stanford University for treatment using the newest technology. All these treatments carry risks. The repeated radiation has taken a toll on my mind and body. But I also hold out a chance of hope. I want to do anything within reason to prolong my life. My wife, daughter and two sons have been fantastic in supporting me through this fight with cancer.

The current phase of my illness feels like the last hurrah. After eight years of living under the gun while fighting it, it's becoming clear the cancer is not going away and my life is nearing its end. I've accepted my death as approaching and unavoidable, and my family and I have had a long time to deal with our grief. I approach the end of my life with a clear mind.

I was heartened when the Montana Supreme Court decided I have a choice on how I am allowed to die. Unfortunately, not everyone agrees this will be my decision to make. Opponents in our legislature have already announced they will try to pass a law to take away my end-of-life choice, and yours. We should reject those efforts. Government should stay out of the medical decisions between a doctor and a mentally competent, terminally ill adult. It's only compassionate to minimize unnecessary suffering at the end of life, and to let me make the choice about how much suffering to endure, based on my own values and beliefs. I am glad Compassion & Choices is leading the fight against those who want to decide how we are allowed to die.

I want my physician to be able to respect and honor my choice to die with dignity. Adults like myself should have the option, if terminally ill, to request physician assistance in dying. Even though I don't know whether I would ultimately take medication to end my life peacefully, I'd like to have the choice.